

Music Culture in the Omaha Tribe of North
America and the Saami of Northern
Scandinavia:
An Analysis of the Similarities and Possible Cultural
Connections Between *Vuolle* and *Be-thae wa-an*

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04/2010

Within both the Saami of northern Scandinavian and the Native American tribe known as the Omaha, there exists a rich and complex musical culture. This essay analyzes the intricacies and aural similarities of the aforementioned cultures and strives to determine the causation of their distinct musical parallels—specifically between the *be-thae wa-an* of the Omaha and the *vuolle* of the southern Saami.

This project was made possible through the generous funding of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program.

Intricacies of *Yoik* Singing

Yoik is a unique cultural aspect of the inhabitants of the region of Sápmi, an area found in the northern parts of Norway, Finland, Sweden, and a small portion of western Russia. This tradition, while fundamentally musical, is deeply rooted in the spirituality of its purveyors—the Saami. Traditional *yoik* is almost exclusively vocal, with the singular exception of the shaman drum used as an accompaniment. While Western songs typically are sung about a subject, inanimate or otherwise, a *yoik* *is* the subject. Ursula Länsman, a member of the Saami musical group *Angelit*, lent this description of *yoik* to the online magazine *FolkWorld*:¹

A *yoik* is not merely a description; it attempts to capture its subject in its entirety: it's like a holographic, multi-dimensional living image, a replica, not just a flat photograph or simple visual memory. It is not **about** something, it **is** that something. It does not begin and it does not end. A *yoik* does not need to have words – its narrative is in its power, it can tell a life story in song. The singer can tell the story through words, melody, rhythm, expressions or gestures.²

To give the listeners of *yoik* an accurate representation of the subject, metaphors derived from nature are heavily relied upon. Most commonly, the metaphors compare humans to animals. However, when an animal is being chanted, it may be personified and its behaviors anthropomorphized. All too often, chants may not make use of words at all—instead relying upon syllables without inherent meaning (i.e. *lul-la*, *lui-lu*, *nu*, etc.) to give the melody greater creative possibilities in describing the subject of the *yoik*.³

Yoik has many social and spiritual connections to the residents of Sápmi. It is deemed taboo for a chanter to *yoik* him/herself, as it is considered presumptuous and in bad taste. This

¹ Kathryn Burke, “The Sami Yoik”, *Samí Culture*, 03 Mar. 2010, <<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/diehtu/giella/music/yoiksunna.htm>>.

² Ursula Länsman, “Sámi Culture and the Yoik” *Folkworld: Scene from Inside*, May 1995, 23 Mar. 2010, <<http://www.folkworld.de/9/e/sami.html>>.

³ ed. Ulla-Maija Kulonen et al., eds., *The Saami: A Cultural Encyclopedia*, (SKS, 2005), 47.

serves to reinforce the Saami concept of family and community being the creators of an individual's identity. When a person is *yoiked*, the chant takes into account all aspects of personality. The positive aspects along with the negative are chanted, bringing any moral transgressions into the public eye. The purpose of this is to discourage behavior not beneficial to the community and help individuals develop good character.

Spiritually, *yoik* served as an emotional outlet for the Saami and was thought to have the ability to enable telepathic communication that could transcend time and location. *Yoik*, along with the drum, was the primary tool that shaman—or *Noadi*—used when achieving a trance-state. In this trance-state, it was believed that *Noadi* could move between the three worlds comprising the Saami belief system: the world of the living, the *Saivo* world (a heaven/paradise), and the world of the gods.⁴ While primarily functioning in the social and spiritual aspects of Saami life, practical uses of *yoik* included lulling children to sleep and calming herds of reindeer while keeping predators away. The latter was especially useful because the primary occupation of the Saami was reindeer herding.⁵

Styles of *Yoik*

The different styles of *yoik* can be categorized into three geographical regions: the northern *luohti*, the south- and western *vuolle*, and the eastern *leu'dd*. *Luohti* makes use of pentatonic scales with a melody characterized by leaps in pitch. Other characteristics include a distinguishable rhythmic pattern, syncopation and the variation of breathing styles to produce differences in timbre. Unlike the *vuolle* or the *leu'dd*, *luohti* always have a specific subject and

⁴ Kathryn Burke, "The Sami Yoik", *Sami Culture*, 03 Mar. 2010, <<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/diehtu/giella/music/yoiksunna.htm>>.

⁵ ed. Ulla-Maija Kulonen et al., eds., *The Saami: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (SKS, 2005), 47.

that subject is almost always a person. *Luohti* has the distinction of being the most common type of *yoik*, as the majority of the Saami population lives in the northern reaches of Sápmi.

The *leu'dd* is much more free in form than the *luohti*. Often a poetic retelling—rife with text—of the history of the singer's native village, the *leu'dd* is heavily based in improvisation. Free to draw upon differing melodic ideas, some in a distinct meter and some without, the chanter creates variations on a melodic theme: sometimes without ever directly stating that theme.

The third style of *yoik* into which much of the southern region of Sápmi is categorized is “*vuolle*”. *Vuolle* is, as the music researcher Heikki Latinen describes it, “a restrained but intensive manner of singing.” The melody remains constricted to only a few close pitches but the notes are frequently accented with rapid glissandos.⁶ The pitches utilized by *vuolle* chanters employ microtones, as well as pitches recognized by Western music (A, Bb, B, C, Db, E, Eb, F, Gb, G, Ab).⁷ Microtones occur in the space between the smallest interval in western music (the semitone or “half step”) and are quite common in the music of many cultures. For example, the folk music of India and much of the Middle East employs microtones quite regularly. The differences between the *luohti* and the *vuolle* are so great, in fact, that the Swedish scholar and musicologist Olle Edström has suggested that this is indicative of the South Saami having a separate prehistory from their northern counterparts.⁸

⁶ Heikki Latinen, “The Many Faces of the Yoik” *Finnish Music Information Center*, Apr. 1994, 01 Apr. 2010, <<http://www.fimic.fi/fimic/fimic.nsf/0/5CE3EAB9837ADFF8C225750C0044D747?opendocument>>.

⁷ ed. Ulla-Maija Kulonen et al., eds., *The Saami: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (SKS, 2005), 47.

⁸ Heikki Latinen, “The Many Faces of the Yoik” *Finnish Music Information Center*, Apr. 1994, 01 Apr. 2010, <<http://www.fimic.fi/fimic/fimic.nsf/0/5CE3EAB9837ADFF8C225750C0044D747?opendocument>>.

Musical Culture of the Omaha Tribe

The Native Americans who belong to the Omaha tribe have a richly musical culture that has a great deal in common with the musical traditions of the Saami, more specifically, *vuolle*. The songs of the Omaha are categorized by Alice C. Fletcher, a musicologist who worked extensively with Native American music, thusly—Class Songs, Social Songs and Individual Songs.⁹ Class Songs, the first category, are sacred and reserved for only those who hold the (usually higher status) social positions associated with the songs. An individual in the tribe may pick up the song by ear, but would not dare sing it aloud as it would be seen as quite “unbecoming” of an Omaha.¹⁰ Much in the same fashion that the Saami would not *yoik* themselves, the Omaha do not sing songs that are reserved for those of higher social prestige. The next category, Social Songs, is unique to certain societies within the tribe. These societies may be religious, secret, historical, or more simply a club in which people can meet and socialize. The songs can be sung at the various gatherings of the society as a display of talent or as part of a ceremony or ritual. The final category, Individual Songs, is reserved for songs that are used to express a personal feeling or appeal to something. These songs can be sung by one person, a group of people who are about to engage in a similar action together, or individuals bonded through similar spiritual visions obtained while fasting. This category includes war songs, mystery songs, love songs (*be-thae wa-an*), myth songs, songs of thanks, and *wa-oo wa-an* (the Omaha equivalent of a “ballad”).¹¹

Much in the same tradition as the Saami, words become of secondary importance to the music. Many Omaha songs do not have words at all, but rather syllables that lend themselves to

⁹ Alice C. Fletcher and John Comfort Fillmore, *A Study of Omaha Indian Music*, (Massachusetts: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1893) 17.

¹⁰ Fletcher 22.

¹¹ Fletcher 43.

the contours of the melody. When it is deemed necessary to include words, oftentimes they will be shaped and changed in ways that may render them unrecognizable. The most common technique that is used is the addition of syllables to words to make them both more melodious and rhythmically in sync with the song. Most often, the syllables used begin with the letters “h, th, or y” and their overall quality reflects the mood of the song being sung. Some examples include the mellow and flowing “*hae, ha, hi, ho, hu*” syllables, commonly used for love songs, or the harsh “*ya, yae, yee, yi*” syllables, which are used to convey aggressive emotions and used in songs dealing with war. Words are not only added to, but also modified. The original accents of the word may be displaced or changed entirely. These changes are subject to the judgment of the composer. Once a composer sets syllables or words to his/her music, they remain unchanged by those who later learn the song.¹² The starting pitch is not preserved, however, it being the custom of the Omaha to start songs in whichever range best suits the voice singing. However, the words, accents, and syllables created by the composer stay rigidly true to original form.¹³

The common practices used when singing Omaha song are quite numerous and in depth. As mentioned earlier, there is no uniform key or starting pitch for songs, but once a starting pitch is determined by the singer, the intervals of the song remain the same as they have always been. The scales that John Comfort Fillmore—researcher and assistant to Alice C. Fletcher—tried to categorize Omaha music into were both the major and minor pentatonic scale. However, more often than not, the scales used could not be categorized by the Western system of music theory. The pentatonic scale is a five note scale that is common throughout folk music of the world. The major pentatonic is similar to a major scale except that it omits the fourth and seventh degrees of the scale. For example, a C major pentatonic scale contains the pitches C, D, E, G, and A,

¹² Fletcher 12.

¹³ Fletcher 11.

omitting the F and the B, which a C major scale would include. Its minor counterpart omits the second and sixth degree of the scale. The Omaha have no qualms, however, of straying from this scale form, which they do not try to consciously follow in the first place, and creating their own variations. They may add or subtract scale tones at will, creating synthetic scales or make use of microtones, much like the Saami.¹⁴ Fluctuations in musical dynamics are almost never used, as many times the Omaha are competing to be heard over the drum or other accompanying instrument. Occasionally during *be-thae wa-an*, an exception will be made to this. The technique of vibrato, or the use of the vocal cords to cause a pitch to waver, is frequently used on sustained tones. When two or more individuals are singing together, it is always in unison, but spread over two or three octaves. The overtones that result from this have the ability to create an implied harmony in the ear of the listener.¹⁵

Omaha song is most often accompanied by drums of varying sizes. The size of the drum depends upon the song being sung and is played differently based upon the specific character of that song. For dream and mystery songs, the small drum is played lightly and rapidly with either the fingers or a small reed beater. For religious ceremonies, the large drum is used. Along with the drum, the rattle and the wooden flute are utilized for certain songs as well.

While the *be-thae wa-an* of the Omaha and the *vuolle* of the South Saami do not necessarily share meaning (although a *vuolle* may occasionally be used to woo a bride), they share much in the musical sense. Being classified into a specific subcategory (unlike *vuolle*, which is a general term for the *yoik* of the South Saami), there are general guidelines that are observed when a *be-thae wa-an* is sung. Usually sung in the early hours of the morning, a man may wait somewhere outside his prospective bride's tent and sing. Upon hearing the song, the

¹⁴ Fletcher 60.

¹⁵ Fletcher 11.

woman may later meet her suitor at a predetermined spot where they can be alone together, if she feels so inclined. There are few words set to *be-thae wa-an*, and the words that are there mainly speak to the time of day in which the song is occurring.¹⁶

Similarities Between *Vuolle* and *Be-thae wa-an*

The most remarkable musical similarity between *be-thae wa-an* and *vuolle* is the similar use of the technique of “glissando”. A glissando is the act of sliding between two pitches without landing on any pitch in between. Were a musician to employ a glissando between the pitches A and D, for example, the listener would hear a smooth rise in pitch after the initial A was sounded until the musician reached the D. Glissandos can be performed at any speed, slow or quick. In the *be-thae wa-an* and the *vuolle*, the glissandos tend to be quick and generally span somewhere in the vicinity of three to four semitones. The singers achieve this by constricting the throat and manipulating the speed at which the air leaves their body. To accurately transcribe the music of the *be-thae wa-an* or the *vuolle*, it is necessary to speak in terms of semitones rather than the traditional western “intervals” (i.e. major/minor third, perfect fourth, etc.) because of the lack of a key center. A piece with a key center has a hierarchy of chords which leads the ear of the listener to hear when the piece is finished, by returning to the “tonic chord”, or the key center. A piece that is in the key of C would usually end with the tonic chord of C. By these standards, it would be impossible for a listener to determine the end of a *be-thae wa-an* or *vuolle* because a key center is non-existent.

¹⁶ Fletcher 53-54.

The notation used in transcribing the following musical examples makes use of the “sharp”, “flat”, or “natural” (#, ♭, or ♮) after every note with the exception of when the immediately preceding note is of the exact same quality.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2

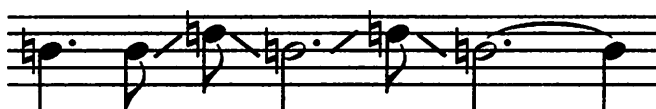


Fig. 1 is an example of a glissando in a *vuolle*. The singer quickly raises the pitch A♭ four semitones, and then just as quickly lowers it again by three semitones. Fig. 2 is an example of a glissando in a *be-thae wa-an*. In this example, the singer raises the pitch B natural by three semitones and then returns to the starting pitch.

The general practice amongst singers of the *be-thae wa-an* and the *vuolle* appears to involve gradually raising or lowering the contour of the melody over the course of the song. The degree to which the overall pitch of the song is modified in a *vuolle* is not much—usually only by one or two semitones. Singers of *be-thae wa-an* make use of a much larger span—12 or more semitones, but the general concept of a gradual alteration of the melody remains the same.

Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b



Fig. 3a details the beginning of a *be-thae wa-an* and Fig. 3b the end. The starting pitch in Fig. 3a is an F# and the ending pitch, as shown in Fig 3b, is slightly higher than an F#, making the span of the melody around 12 semitones.

Fig. 4a

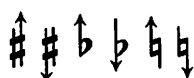


Fig. 4b



Fig. 4a exhibits the beginning of a *vuolle* and Fig. 4b the end. It is interesting to observe that the rhythmic figure from the beginning is repeated, but raised around two semitones.

It should be noted that when transcribing *vuolle* or *be-thae wa-an*, it sometimes becomes necessary to use the following symbols in addition to traditional western notation:



These symbols were developed to help composers and musicologists better notate pitches that do not fall into the standard western scales. The up and down arrows were added to the pre-existing #, ♭, and ♮ to indicate the direction in which the pitch is stretched. Notes with these symbols do not fall directly between semitones in western notation (there are other symbols to indicate that) but lie somewhere slightly above or below what the pitches would be if they had an unmodified #, ♭, or ♮ attached. Performers of *be-thae wa-an* and *vuolle* often use slightly altered pitches that do not quite correspond with any note that can be found on a piano.

Fig. 5



In *vuolle*, a rhythmic presence is not always felt, but in Figures 7 and 8, below, there is a steady eight-note and quarter-note pulse, respectively.

While it remains remarkable that two cultures so geographically separated could have such similarities in their respective music, the question must be asked: “Are the similarities a result of some sort of cultural contact, are they, to some extent, a result of something innate within all humans, or is it simply a coincidence?”

Genetic Roots and Possible Musical Connections of the Omaha and the Saami

The genetic makeup of every single human being can be categorized into a certain “haplogroup”. Genetic researchers use haplogroups to classify unique genetic mutations in the Y-chromosome of humans. A new haplogroup is considered to come into existence when a single letter in the DNA strand of the Y-chromosome is changed from one to another. This is known as a Single Nucleotide Polymorphism (SNP). The occurrence of an SNP in the Y-chromosome means that this new genetic makeup is passed along through generations from father to son until another such change occurs.¹⁷ The haplogroups that almost all Native Americans can trace their lineage through are groups A, B, C, D, Q (subgroups M3 and M242), and X. These ancestral lines go back as far as 50,000 years, originating in the area known now as the Middle East. The haplogroup that the Saami belong to, U5, a subgroup of the haplogroup U, came into existence a mere 15,000 years ago. This is around the time that haplogroups A, B, C, D, Q, and X were beginning to populate the Americas.¹⁸ The dissimilar genetic makeup and the extreme geographic separation of the Saami and Native Americans shows that there was probably no cultural contact between them. Additionally, even though haplogroups A, B, C, D,

¹⁷ DNA Heritage, “Masterclass” *DNA Heritage*, 16, Apr. 2010, <<http://www.dnaheritage.com/masterclass2.asp>>.

¹⁸ National Geographic, “Atlas of the Human Journey”, *The Genographic Project*, 15, Apr. 2010, <<https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/lan/en/atlas.html>>.

Q, X, and U all probably originated from the N haplogroup¹⁹, it is unlikely for a common cultural aspect such as music to have survived over 50,000 years. This narrows down the explanation to either being coincidental or instinctual. A logical explanation is that it is a little bit of both. The voice remains the most common instrument used by many cultures, so it is only natural that two separate cultures would develop a method of singing that was similar to one another. The distinct and specific similarities between the *be-thae wa-an* and the *vuolle*, however give weight to the possibility that coming to such musical methods is something deeply ingrained in the human race.

Whatever the connection may be, there is no doubt that there are distinct similarities between the *be-thae wa-an* of the Omaha and the *vuolle* of the south and west Saami. Perhaps some yet undiscovered artifact will reveal definitive cultural contact between the Saami and the Omaha, but for now it must be said that the two cultures developed this unique musical style independent of one another.

¹⁹ National Geographic, "Atlas of the Human Journey", *The Genographic Project*, 15, Apr. 2010, <<https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/lan/en/atlas.html>>.

Appendix

The following music was transcribed and notated by the author from audio files obtained from:

Fjällman, Anders Gustav. "Vuolle." University of Helsinki. MP3.

<[http://www-db.helsinki.fi/cgi-bin/thw/?\\$%7BBASE%7D=saamimedia&\\$%7BSNHTML%7D=nosynaudioen&\\$%7Bhtml%7D=listaudioen&LA=11&%24%7BSORT%7D=tien](http://www-db.helsinki.fi/cgi-bin/thw/?$%7BBASE%7D=saamimedia&$%7BSNHTML%7D=nosynaudioen&$%7Bhtml%7D=listaudioen&LA=11&%24%7BSORT%7D=tien)>.

Miller, George (Inke'tonga-Big Shoulder). "Be-thae wa-an." Library of Congress. 1897. MP3.

<<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/omhtml/omhhome.html>>.

Vuolle

As performed by:
Anders Gustav Fjällman

♩ = 152



Vuolle

As performed by:
Anders Gustav Fjällman

$\text{♩} = 200$



Be-thae wa-an

As performed by:
George Miller
(In-ke-tonga "Big Shoulder")

♩ = 176



Be-thae wa-an

As performed by:
George Miller
(In-ke-tonga "Big Shoulder")

♩ = 192



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<<http://www.fimic.fi/fimic/fimic.nsf/0/5CE3EAB9837ADFF8C225750C0044D747?openDocument>>.

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